

Summary of Recent Reports on Community and General Public Views Relevant to Land Use Planning in the Porcupine Hills

Compiled by Cheryl Bradley for the Porcupine Hills Coalition, February 2016

There has been extensive public and community-based consultation around land use priorities and management for Alberta's southern foothills, including the Porcupine Hills. Consultations were undertaken through the Southern Foothills Study, the Southern Foothills Community Stewardship Initiative, the MD of Pincher Creek Community Values Assessment, the Oldman Watershed Council Headwaters Action Plan, and the CPAWS Survey of Albertans' Values and Attitudes toward Recreation and Wilderness.

These consultations were supported by a wide range of stakeholders, including municipal and provincial governments. We would strongly encourage the provincial government to incorporate the learnings from these into their planning considerations for the Porcupine Hills. To not do so would risk missing valuable information but more importantly risk ignoring the views and values of those communities and individuals most closely connected to the Porcupine Hills.

Southern Foothills Study

The decade-long Southern Foothills Study (2005-2015) was initiated by local ranchers and expanded to include municipal and provincial government, environmental and conservation groups, industry, recreational users and interested individuals in a common purpose: "how to protect and sustain our iconic foothills landscape, its unique ecology, and the ecosystem services it provides". The Porcupine Hills area is a central part of the study area.

The Southern Foothills Study was supported financially by the MDs of Willow Creek, Foothills, Ranchland and Pincher Creek, the Alberta Land Use Framework, the Oldman Watershed Council and several landowner and conservation organizations as well as individuals. Process and findings are documented in two reports available on the website of the Southern Alberta Land Trust Society:

The Changing Landscape of the Southern Alberta Foothills (June 2007)

A Future Worth Protecting: Beneficial Management Practices and the Southern Alberta Foothills (March 2015)

The ALCES^R Group assessed the cumulative effects of past and projected future land use trends on water quality, water quantity, native fescue grasslands and grizzly bears (selected as an indicator species). It concluded that the quality of the environment as shown by these indicators had been reduced significantly during the past century and deterioration is projected to continue into the future unless there are changes to current policy and usage. Even with application of beneficial management practices, the trend lines will continue downward, although on a less steep trajectory.

As part of the Southern Foothills Study, the Praxis Group™, in late 2006, undertook a survey of public attitudes of 600 individuals at seven meetings in the planning area and through a random sample telephone survey of 800 respondents in Calgary, Lethbridge and more than 20 communities in or directly adjacent to the study area. Results of the surveys are documented in two reports also available on the website of the Southern Alberta Land Trust Society (http://www.salts-landtrust.org/sfs/sfs_reporting.html):

Southern Foothills Study Written Survey Results (Praxis Research, February 2007)

Southern Foothills Study Telephone Survey Results (Praxis Research, February 2007)

The surveys found that a majority of both rural and urban dwellers view protection of watershed as a planning priority for the southern foothills. In a ranking of concerns about nine features of the landscape the area of greatest concern was reduced water quality in rivers, streams, springs and aquifers and loss of wildlife habitat. Loss of area for recreation was of significantly less concern.

The Southern Foothills Study concluded that limits need to be placed on the cumulative effects of land use activities contributing to environmental degradation and recommended that a dominant or priority land use designation for headwaters conservation be applied to the Eastern Slopes. “The bottom line is that our society will be happier, healthier and more prosperous if we protect this landscape.”

Southern Foothills Community Stewardship Initiative – Values and Voices

Using the Southern Foothills Study as a starting point, the Southern Foothills Community Stewardship Initiative in 2010 and 2011 further engaged the region’s citizens in defining values that would inform land-use planning and management in Alberta’s southern foothills, including the Porcupine Hills. The Southern Foothills Community Stewardship Initiative was led by the Pekisko Group and the Chinook Institute for Community Stewardship. Support was provided by the Alberta Real Estate Foundation, Government of Alberta – Community Initiatives Program, M.D. of Foothills, M.D. of Ranchlands and the Wilburforce Foundation.

Eight community forums, organized by a professional facilitator and attended by approximately 300 people, were held across Alberta’s southern foothills. Conversations focused on what residents value, benefits provided by the landscape and how to maintain ecological integrity of Alberta’s southern foothills. The results of these in-depth conversations are presented in a report available on the website of the Alberta Real Estate Foundation (<http://aref.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/values-and-voices.pdf>):

Values and Voices: Stewardship Priorities for the Southern Alberta Foothills (November 2011)

The values expressed as vitally important to consider in future planning relate to water security, traditional lifestyle and culture, aesthetics, wildlife, opportunities for low impact recreation, clean air, food production and the ethic of stewardship. Participants' perceptions of essential ecological goods and services and cultural benefits provided by the foothills landscape were defined. Recommendations are to integrate land and water planning, protect the watershed, manage for connected landscapes, develop stewardship capacity, set thresholds for managing cumulative effects and develop economic incentives for stewardship. "The bottom line is... acting with respect for the local people and the landscape that local people value will help to ensure both the long-term prosperity of those who live in the Southern Foothills, and the continued provision of the essential ecological services and cultural benefits that this area offers to Albertans."

Community Values Assessment for the M.D. of Pincher Creek

In 2011, the Southwest Alberta Sustainable Community Initiative in collaboration with the Municipal District of Pincher Creek No. 9 contracted the Praxis Group™ to conduct an assessment that would help the MD consider community values more effectively in decision-making and develop better practices for land use and land management. Social, economic and environmental aspects of community life in the MD of Pincher Creek were considered. The assessment included a random sample telephone survey of MD residents, a series of small group discussions with representatives of key economic and socio-cultural sectors and stakeholder groups and a final session with key interests to validate the initial findings and discuss next steps.

The results of the assessment are provided in a report available on the website of the Southern Alberta Sustainable Community Initiative (<http://www.sasci.ca/community-values-assessment/>):

Community Values Assessment for the M.D. of Pincher Creek No. 9 (March 2012)

Both survey and group session participants identified priority values related to the theme of environmental conservation, including protecting the natural environment, conserving and protecting water resources, practicing sustainable agriculture and maintaining natural wildlife and fish populations. Respondents strongly supported setting aside land in an undisturbed state for habitat protection. Having access to a range of outdoor recreation opportunities is generally agreed to be a valued benefit, particularly for non-motorized recreation. There was opposition to increased opportunities for motorized recreation (OHVs, dirt bikes, etc.) and concern about enforcing appropriate use of public land.

Oldman Watershed Council Headwaters Action Plan – Source to Tap

In 2012 and 2013, Water Matters and the Oldman Watershed Council (OWC) led a community-based initiative to engage people in sharing their knowledge and priorities to further good stewardship in the headwaters. There were a total of 17 community conversations guided by professional facilitators that engaged 350 participants in town, city and country halls.

Results of the community dialogues are presented in a report available on the OWC website (http://oldmanbasin.org/files/4613/8429/2152/Source_to_Tap_Summary_Report_Nov2013.pdf):

Source to Tap: Community Conversations on Headwaters Health and Stewardship in the Oldman River Basin, Summary of Community Dialogues (November 2013)

Activities or factors perceived to affect headwaters health in a negative way include cumulative effect of land uses, as evidenced by increased linear disturbances, and recreation activities along and in water courses (camping along water courses, motorized vehicles) that are affecting water quality. Key stewardship requirements and opportunities identified included considering watershed health as a primary value in land use decision-making and managing recreation to reduce negative effects on ecosystem integrity and water quality.

Survey of Albertans' Values and Attitudes toward Recreation and Wilderness

In 2015, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) Southern and Northern Alberta chapters commissioned The Praxis Group™ to survey Albertans about their recreation activity and their behaviour, attitudes and values related to nature and outdoor recreation. Results of the random sample telephone survey of 1300 interviewees are presented in a report available on the CPAWS website (http://cpaws-southernalberta.org/upload/CPAWS_FINAL_REPORT_2015.pdf):

Albertans' Values and Attitudes toward Recreation and Wilderness: Final Report
(September 2014)

The findings clearly show that the large majority of Albertans are taking part in some form of outdoor recreation (76%). The results also show Albertans support land being set aside for wilderness and protection (94%) and they prefer non-motorized recreation (67%). Most Alberta campers choose designated campgrounds over random camping (77%).

In the South Saskatchewan Region, there is high levels of participation in hiking on trails (63%) in summer and fall, likely partly due to the extensive inner city trail networks in Calgary and Lethbridge. Only 2% of residents participate in off-road motorcycling or OHV use in summer and fall and 3% in winter and spring. In winter and spring, about one in five residents of the South Saskatchewan Region participate in cross country skiing (14%) or snowshoeing (18%) and far fewer participate in snowmobiling (2%).